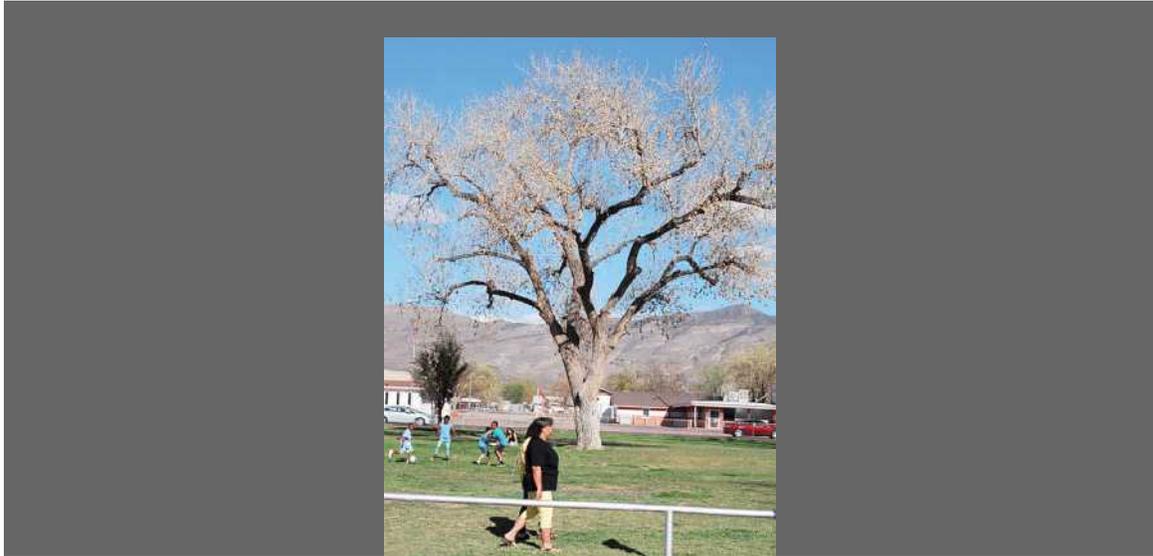


City of Alamogordo eyes soil conditioner to help cottonwoods

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By John Bear, Staff Writer
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The city is planning on purchasing four tons of a soil conditioning... (John Bear/Daily News)

The cottonwood trees at Alameda Park might get a new lease on life.

The city's parks department is working with a Los Lunas-based company to purchase a soil conditioning product that will help flush accumulated salts from soil around the trees in an effort to restore them to good health, according to Parks Supervisor Erik Marion.

"We're purchasing a product that's laboratory-tested to alleviate some of the detrimental salt effects from the effluent water," Marion said. "There's a high sodium content in the effluent water, the reclaimed water. It's a byproduct of the purification system."

He said the city will try the product sold by Soil Secrets out at Alameda Park, and if it works, it will be used on other areas of the city.

"We're going to purchase four tons and primarily use it on those cottonwood trees that are showing the most effects," Marion said. "The

north end of the park has been affected more heavily than the south end."

Michael Melendrez, owner of Soil Secrets, said effluent water will always have a high salt content but the soil-conditioning product contains an active ingredient that is useful for removing salt from soil.

Melendrez said salt can reach toxic levels in soil, eventually causing a "cascading failure."

He said the product, called Terrapro, was developed and tested with the help of Sandia and Los Alamos national laboratories.

Melendrez said the molecule in Terrapro also helps keep water in the soil by binding with water

molecules.

"A single molecule will hold in its orbit, its energy field, 10,000 water molecules," Melendrez said. "That's water that will be available for trees."

Melendrez said declining water supplies as well as a decline in quality are issues worldwide, as most food consumed is grown on irrigated land.

He said the product is being used in arid areas as far away as Africa and the Middle East, and it can keep soil moist for up to two months, sometimes making the difference between a successful crop and failed one.

Locally, the product might be useful in the Rio Grande Valley, where water shortages have led to restrictions on irrigation, Melendrez said.

He said the product is safe and can even be eaten, though he doesn't recommend it.

Many of Alameda Park's cottonwood trees primarily on the north side have fallen into poor health in recent years. The park, which runs along North White Sands Boulevard, is the site of the yearly cottonwood festival.

Marion said the soil conditioning product costs about \$960 per ton and he hopes to get the project under way as soon as possible.

He said the trees in Alameda Park and much of the plant life around the city also have been negatively impacted by a harsh freeze about two years ago when temperatures plummeted to nearly 20 degrees below zero.

"Unless something was just in extraordinary good health in the first place, that freeze was harmful," he said. "They took a beating there."

Marion said Alamogordo is also approaching the third year of a drought, which also has impacted much of the plant life in the city, because the soil is not cleansed of accumulated salts and other materials detrimental to good plant health.

"One of the beneficial effects of the natural rain water that we receive is it flushes that soil profile all the total dissolved solids, the salts and things like that that have a tendency to accumulate over the course of a year," he said.

He said the city cannot count on rain to help it irrigate landscaped areas, and it does not have enough effluent water to properly irrigate the trees.

"We're not always as effective in the watering as I would like," he said. "They can only produce so much waste water."